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ABSTRACT

The politics of education is a study in the exercise of power. There are two forms of power--position power and persuasive power. Position power changes with conditions and legal mandates, while persuasive power rests in the communicative ability and knowledge of the individual, regardless of position. The exercise of power occurs within the moral context of its aims and means and can be corrupted by the means it uses or the ends it hopes to achieve. The exercise of political power in education must be guided by traditional values. Decisions of superintendents and actions of boards of education, parents, and teachers must be congruent with historical democratic ethical principles. Power is exercised as a process or as a series of actions which lead to success or failure depending on the effectiveness of the process. Success depends on possessing a sound knowledge base and being able to communicate and to agree on an action. Exercising power at the local, state, and federal levels demands increasingly complex methods. The exercise of power fails if either the aims are inappropriate or the means are corrupt. (FG)

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Paper presented at the International Conference
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THE POLITICS OF EDUCATION

M. Donald Thomas

The politics of education is a study in the exercise of power. There are two forms of power - position power and persuasive power. Further the exercise of power occurs within a moral context - it is ethical in both its aims and its means, or is corrupted either by the means it uses or the ends it hopes to achieve. And finally, power is exercised as a process, or a series of actions, which lead to success or failure depending on the effectiveness of that process. This then is what this paper will discuss:

1. The politics of education is the exercise of power.
2. Power is exercised because of the position one holds or because of one's ability to persuade others to do certain things.
3. The exercise of power is moral or immoral when reflected against the aims it hopes to achieve or the means used to achieve it.
4. The exercise of power is a process - a series of activities carried out in an intelligent manner by individuals.
5. The exercise of power is successful when appropriate aims are achieved through ethical means.
6. The exercise of power is a failure if either the aims are inappropriate or the means are, in themselves, corrupt.

Education and the Exercise of Power

All political action is a matter of power - the ability to make others do what we want them to do. Power is exercised when

SP 221148

parents force the school district to fire a particular employee. Power is demonstrated when the Board of Education terminates the superintendent of schools. Power is used to ratify E.R.A., pass the federal budget, or establish a particular program in a local school. Power is exercised when we have our children mow the lawn, do their homework, or practice their piano lessons.

In education power is demonstrated by electing members to the Board of Education, by the selection of a superintendent of schools, by the development of an educational program, by exercising censorship over instructional materials, or by the closure of schools. In each instance these are individual actions which come from the belief that a particular thing is the right thing to do. Anyone who presses for a certain aim, or who tries to persuade someone to say or do a particular thing, is exercising political power. The exercise of that power is either successful or not successful depending on whether or not those who are asked to do certain things, do, in fact, engage in doing the things they are asked to do.

Here is an example. In a particular school district there is no volunteer program. A group of parents wish to establish a volunteer program. They meet. They discuss what actions need to be taken. They call members of the Board of Education. They visit with the superintendent of schools. They talk to teachers and principals. They raise money. They obtain the support of senior citizens. They engage in a number of activities aimed at establishing a volunteer program in the school district. Their actions are an exercise of political power. If the volunteer program is established, they will have been successful in the exercise of

that power. If the program is not established, they will have failed. Effective political behavior is the process of doing what one believes ought to be done.

Position Power and Persuasive Power

People have the ability to exercise many forms of power. They have power because of the position they hold. They have power because of the money they have. They have power because of the information they control. They also have power because of their ability to communicate, ability to think, or ability to synthesize ideas. Essentially, individuals have power 1) because of the positions they hold, or 2) because of their ability to persuade, regardless of positions they hold.

Position Power. All positions have some inherent historically recognized and socially accepted power. The position of mother has special powers over children and sometimes over husbands. The position of father has historically had power beyond that of mother. It is only within recent years that equity of power has been established between mother and father. Similarly the P.T.A. president, the principal, the superintendent, the teacher, the board member - all have position power. In many cases, individuals assume more power than is inherent in the position. When individuals assume more power from a particular position than is generally believed to reside in that position, conflicts arise. Such was the case in the Nixon administration, in the 1900-1950 era when superintendents assumed far more power than they should have had, or in the 1950-1970 period when teachers exercised more

power through collective negotiations than was appropriate. Today, the position of parent or citizen is demonstrating its historical power when we talk about parent participation in education, citizen involvement in schools, public confidence in education, and school-community partnership programs. Power, which can be exercised from a position, changes with the conditions that require the exercise of that power and it is usually defined in the law.

Persuasive Power. Power also resides in an individual regardless of the position he/she may hold. Each individual has some power which he/she can choose or not choose to exercise. Individual power results from one's ability to communicate ideas, organize action, or cause things to happen. Call it what you will: charisma, force, hypnotism, fear, knowledge, attraction, magnetism, or whatever, individuals have some power to influence others. Generally, individual power is closely related to knowledge, ability to communicate ideas, ability to motivate others, and ability to synthesize and act upon the norms of a particular group. Individual power usually expresses Aristotle's "golden mean" that which the group (or majority of the group) wishes to attain. The most persuasive person tends to be one who can articulate and move toward group wishes.

The expression of individual power varies with circumstances and with the issues of a particular time. One person may be very powerful in one situation, but not another. One may be very powerful with a school issue, but not so powerful with a city

government issue. One may be powerful in his/her neighborhood, but quite impotent with his/her church. No one has yet been able to fully explain the fickleness of individual power, the conditions for its existence, or the appropriate time for its expression. That it is demonstrated in some very unusual ways is its only constant.

The Moral Nature of Power

Power is always exercised within a moral content. What it aims to do has a moral composition and the means to obtain the ends are always moral in nature. Power and morality go hand in glove, are married to each other, and cannot be separated. So the exercise of power must always be reflected against a moral criteria. Especially in governmental agencies, like schools, the moral criteria must guide our actions and determine the objectives of such actions. No goal, no activity, no human action is of value in schools or anywhere else, if such goals or actions are tainted by a violation of moral principles.

As we exercise political power in education we must be guided by the traditional values upon which our nation was founded. Actions of boards of education, decisions of superintendents, the actions of parents, teachers, or anyone else must be congruent to these historical democratic ethical principles:

1. Belief in the worth and the perfectibility of human life on this earth.
2. Conviction that democratic societies have more to offer than totalitarian ones.

3. Faith in reason and in orderly solution of conflict between individuals and between nations.
4. Respect for knowledge and a strong commitment to education for all.
5. Protection of personal liberties within limits established by law.
6. Equal protection under the law and equal opportunity for personal and economic success for all persons.

Power can be used for good or for evil. Power can be exercised in good or evil ways. What is important to understand is that no good can ever result from either evil ways or evil goals. Maintaining unequal educational opportunities for children is an evil that cannot be sustained. At the same time the creation of equal opportunity through injury to persons or property is an equal evil.

In the exercise of political power, we have a tendency to believe that a good end justifies an evil mean. It simply cannot be done. We don't improve the quality of teaching by violating due process rights of teachers. We don't improve educational opportunities of minorities by burning the cars of board members. We don't improve the working conditions of teachers by striking against the educational services needed by children. Whatever the political actions taken by anyone - those actions should conform to a criteria of ethical principles. When such a criteria is established, it becomes easier to select from the many possible power actions that can be committed.

It also becomes easier to decide the issues:

1. Should mandatory prayer be established in schools?
2. Should books be excluded from public libraries?
3. Should children be segregated based on race?
4. Should handicapped children be provided an appropriate education?
5. Should parents have access to school information about their children?
6. Is collective bargaining appropriate in public education?

Without a moral criteria the exercise of power is dangerous and unpredictable. It can save us or destroy us. It can create better schools or destroy them altogether. Parent actions, similar to the actions of others, must be reflected in a moral context or not be exercised at all.

Power as A Process. The exercise of power is a series of human actions. In education those actions are aimed at changing the values or behaviors of board of education members, legislators, or school employees. In carrying out those actions, the most important talent to develop is one of effectively communicating ideas. When one talks to a principal, or a teacher, in order to understand something, or in order to change a condition or practice, one must be effective in communicating with that principal or that teacher.

Knowledge as a Basis for Effective Communication. If one hopes to communicate effectively, he/she must be extremely well informed. Knowledge is power. Great knowledge is great power. Overwhelming knowledge is overwhelming power. There is no better

substitute in the exercise of political power in the school setting than to be extremely well informed about laws, regulations, budgets, educational research, test scores, salary schedules, textbooks, educational programs, board policies, written agreements, and evaluation reports. The first step in the exercise of responsible power is to know what it is that you are talking about and why a particular course of action is appropriate. Examples:

1. A knowledge of the Buckley Amendment is no match for a school district that will not share information with parents.
2. A thorough explanation of the Hatch Amendment will quickly convince teachers not to administer quasi-psychological survey instruments to your children.
3. A thorough understanding of the first amendment to the U.S. Constitution will place mandatory prayer in proper perspective.
4. A knowledge and an articulation of the fourteenth amendment to the U.S. Constitution will adequately establish the need for a "free and appropriate education for handicapped children."
5. The principles of "due process" and the "presumption of innocence" will do much to insure justice and fairness for both school employees and school children.
6. Understanding tax laws, budgets, mill levies, and money matters will go a long way in helping boards of education to make appropriate decisions.

Communicating Information to Others. Being knowledgeable is the first step. Communicating information to others is the second step. Communications is a human act. It begins with people and ends with people. Whether through mass media or person to person, the process stems from an individual attempting to convey a message and ends with an individual who decides how to respond, if at all, to the message. The individual who initiates the message commits a political act - an attempt to influence another person. The individual who receives the message may act on it or ignore it. Effective political behavior is the successful exercise of persuasive power and results in the receiver of the message doing what he/she who sends the message wants done.

Since two people attempting to communicate with each other have different fields of experience, messages tend not to be heard if they are not within the experience field of both individuals. It is like trying to have Americans fully appreciate why quality circles are effective in Japanese industry or having Japanese understand why General Motors does not have lifetime employment for its workers. Both come from different cultures and each cannot understand the values and behaviors of the other.

Political action, therefore, attempts to influence by enlarging the field of experience which limits the actions of those we wish to influence. That is why parent participation in schools is so effective. That is why legislators who visit school are supportive. That is why the P.T.A. is so successful.

That is why teachers who make home visits are appreciated. That is why some people are easily understood and others are not. Those who are understood more easily share a common field of experience with those with whom they wish to communicate. To walk a mile in the shoes of another is still an effective basis for communication. It establishes a common experience from which to exercise political power.

Now the fireworks begin. There are some among us who believe that communication is effective when power is exercised in brutal ways: intimidation, threats, verbal abuse, bribes, violation of law, character assassination, personal abuse, public ridicule, and on and on and on. All such actions are not only not effective, they are counter-productive. These means simply cannot justify any noble end. No good end can be attained through unethical means. This does not mean, however, that petitions, assemblies, public presentations, debate, and recall cannot be used. It simply means that no good comes out of evil actions, regardless of the rhetoric of the self appointed saints who propound it.

Obtaining an Agreement to Act. Once information is obtained and an individual is identified with whom communication should occur, the next step is to extract an agreement to act. As we have already said, this can best be done by exchanging information in an ethical manner in a common area of experience. Exchanging information, however, is not enough. One must identify what it is you want the other individual to do, when it should be done, and how you will know that it was done. A response should be obtained following the commission of the desired act.

An agreement to commit an action tends to remind the individual that the act should be committed. This is known as the "Asch effect" - the desire to do what one promises to do. It is especially helpful if one obtains an agreement to receive confirmation that the action has been taken from the individual who is to take the action.

It is natural, of course, to express appreciation to the person who acts on our behalf. Appreciation can be expressed by a telephone call, a letter, or a face to face visit. There is no need, under any conditions, to reinforce the action with expensive gift-giving.

Exercising Power in a School Setting

Political power at the school level is exercised by face to face contact with a teacher, a parent, or a principal. Those who wish to exercise power at that level should become familiar with the governance structure of the school, the individuals who influence decisions, and the kinds of decisions which can be made at the local level. This information can be obtained from the formal documents of the school or by a discussion with the principal. Remember, the expression of knowledge tends to solicit more information than when one is uninformed. Visiting with the principal from a base of information, obtains more information than if one approaches the principal without any knowledge. The same is true when talking to the union representatives, parent members of the governance units, or students. Knowledge is a powerful influence in helping others to share information.

Once you become familiar with the politics of the local school - who exercises what power - participation in school affairs become important. It is an opportunity to create common fields of experience and enhance the ability to persuade others to help you in doing whatever you wish to do. Obtaining assistance from several sources; parents, teachers, union, and principal will make it more possible to change the school than if only one source of help is obtained.

Should the issue with which you are dealing be district wide, the individuals to persuade are in the Central Office: superintendent of schools, clerk-treasurer, personnel administrator, federal programs director, assistant superintendent for educational services, director of pupil services, and so on.

The use of intermediaries is an effective method of exercising power with central office personnel. Have a board member arrange the conference for you. Or, if a board member cannot do it, ask a principal or a local parent (who has had previous experience with central office people) do it for you. Intermediaries not only "grease the wheels" for you, they help in having central office personnel give priority to your requests.

Finally, if the system does not respond well at either the school level or the central office level, contact should be made with members of the board of education. First contact the board member who represent your area. (Some board members are elected at large and represent the entire district.) Next, contact all other board members and carefully explain what it is you want them to do. Extract an agreement to act. If necessary, ask to be placed on the board meeting agenda to discuss the actions you wish the board to take.

Exercising Power at the State Level

Exercising power at the state level is much more complicated than doing so at the local level. Those who make decisions at the state level are protected from influence by distance, complexity of state government, and administrative assistants. When exercising power at that level it is important to understand the following items:

1. Financial support for education is controlled as much by the Governor's office as by the State Board of Education or the Legislature. Therefore, working with the Governor or the Governor's budget officer is of primary importance. It is the first opportunity to influence what is done.
2. Working with key members of the legislature is more important than working with many members. Especially important are the education committee chairman and members of the state executive committee.
3. For educational matters, the strongest influence is exercised by individuals working quietly with members of the education committees. Parents are especially important in determining what happens. Mass meetings, pressure tactics, and mass letter writing campaigns have little influence on what is accomplished.
4. Constant contact with the legislative process is imperative in directing the business of the House and Senate.

Exercising Power at the Federal Level

Exercising power at the federal level is even more difficult than doing so at the state level. Federal decision-makers are generally controlled by White House officials and White House policy. To really influence federal policy we must penetrate the White House or work with individual congressional committees. Having a good friend on a committee is helpful. If that is not possible, it is most effective to work through intermediaries - knowing someone who knows a committee member. To influence committee decisions, here is what is suggested:

1. Prepare testimony for the committee and keep feeding information to individual members of the committee.
2. Visit committee members and discuss your interests face-to-face.
3. Gain support for your position from intermediaries and have it expressed by them when they are in Washington.
4. Work with your association to exercise power with influential members of Congress.

Sometimes a clear, concise letter to a presidential advisor, or a member of the White House staff, or a cabinet member will do as much as anything else that you can do. Federal action is as much luck and timing as it is anything else.

Power and School Governance

Unfortunately, the use of power tends to corrupt persons who use it too often or who use it in excess. Constant use of power, even when used with good intentions has a way of obscuring the moral context in which it is to be used. Therefore, we must

protect ourselves from the overuse of power and learn to share power with many. It is the diffusion of power that best protects the moral family, the moral school, or the moral society.

The evil is that once we are successful in exercising our own power, we want to exercise power on behalf of others. There the danger begins. Rather, what we ought to do is to empower others to exercise power on their own behalf. The aim of the powerful is to make others so powerful that one's own power is placed in check. Empowering others is the best way to strengthen a democratic society. It guarantees that the abuse of power will not occur, at least not for a long time over many people.

Those who exercise power in the school arena have a subtle way of taking over the schools and operating them as a personal business for private ends. The less power that is exercised by any one individual, the better it is for all. Though difficult to remember, it is, nevertheless, the salvation of democracy.

One Final Word

In a democratic society the exercise of power tends to produce a regression toward the mean. There is a constant balancing act between the extremes at both ends of the social continuum. Whenever one group gains too much power there is a counter force to reduce that power to tolerable limits. It is under those conditions that democracy, a school district, or a school, functions well.

This is the final lesson for those who exercise power. Power is like a powerful drink - it can refresh, stimulate,

reform, and produce beneficial results or it can corrupt and destroy. It can be a moral and at the same time a dangerous human behavior. It is my hope that in the school setting the wise will exercise power wisely.